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AUTHOR Gregg, Soleil

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ABSTRACT

This policy brief discusses legislative efforts to create separate, alternative schools for students with behavior problems. The first section of the brief identifies the following three problems with placing disruptive students in alternative schools: (1) a focus on problem students may obscure or ignore real problems in the educational system; (2) programs that target individuals divert resources from everyone else; and (3) a focus on problem students may threaten system equity by segregating poor students, students with disabilities, and minority students in alternative programs. The second section of the paper examines the focus of three different types of alternative schools: educational, disciplinary, or therapeutic. The need for schools to understand what they are trying to accomplish in order to plan and implement program strategies is discussed. Practitioners are warned that a punitive purpose may cause schools to adopt ineffective models for improving learning or behavior and jeopardize system equity and excellence. A chart illustrating implementation issues by school type is provided. The final section of the paper discusses key criteria for developing a school climate that contributes to disciplined learning environments. Questions are provided to help clarify whether legislation is accomplishing intended goals. (Contains 44 references.) (CR)

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Policy Briefs

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SCHOOLS FOR DISRUPTIVE STUDENTS: A QUESTIONABLE ALTERNATIVE?

If one in eight Ford Tauruses failed to operate, Taurus would quickly lose its reputation for quality and its popularity with the public. According to tenets of Total Quality Management, if Ford tried to focus blame on individual workers rather than improve systemwide quality, the problem would most likely persist, public and stockholder confidence would deteriorate, and the company might soon be bankrupt.

One in eight students does not complete high school.[1] Minorities, the poor, and the disabled often fare worse. Over 50 percent of students in a quarter of the nation's poor, urban high schools fail to graduate.[2] Suspension, expulsion, retention, chronic failure, and alienation all contribute to unacceptable dropout and incompletion rates. Yet rather than take a systems approach to improvement, many states have created alternative schools for the "problem" individuals thought to degrade general education quality.

Alternative schools evolved decades ago to provide an academic option for students not successful in regular education programs,[3,4] a systems response to "the failure of traditional schools to address the needs of large groups of students."[5] However, recent safe-schools legislation and the commitment to provide orderly, safe, learning environments have prompted states to adopt this model for disciplinary purposes. Since the new disciplinary model lacks the original focus and purpose of its progenitor, can it hope to reproduce its success?

A QUESTION OF FOCUS: THE SYSTEM OR THE INDIVIDUAL?

The first alternative schools tailored the one-size-fits-all education system to better fit the needs of some students.[6,7] They improved student outcomes through individualized instruction, personal attention, and a modified or innovative curriculum.[3,8,9,10,11] Much of the new alternative school legislation, however, aims to modify student behavior so that students better fit the system. Although both approaches share the ultimate goal of improving student outcomes, a fix-the-student focus carries the following inherent risks—educational, financial, and legal.

A focus on "problem" students may obscure or ignore real problems in the system.

Are classes or schools so large that students don't get personal attention, fall behind, and become alienated? When Baltimore's troubled Patterson High School subdivided its student body into five small academies featuring personalization and career-focused curricula, student behavior, attendance, and achievement improved dramatically.[12]

Have teachers received training in behavior management and instructional strategies for students with disabilities and different learning needs? The reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires states to ensure that personnel receive appropriate and adequate training to meet the learning needs of their special education students.[13] It also requires schools to develop Behavior Intervention Plans for exceptional students who exhibit problem behavior.[14]

Do schools' leadership and organization define and support high standards for behavior and achievement? Gottfredson's research showed that improved school organization—management, governance, culture, and climate—can reduce overall student disruption as effectively as individual treatment programs.[15,16] In contrast, a study of New York City's dropout prevention program led researchers to conclude that "programs based on the deficiency model (fix the student) [do] not solve the problems they are trying to correct."[17]

Researchers[12] at Johns Hopkins' Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk conclude that

> some students are so hostile to authority that they need

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> an alternative setting for their education. But at some point, a nonselective school must stop rejecting difficult cases and start finding ways to adapt school to the diverse needs of its students. (p. 17)

Labeling and separating students may further marginalize them, compounding the problems one is trying to "fix."

Programs that target individuals divert resources from everyone else.

Are alternative schools cost effective? The small teacher-pupil ratios and additional services of alternative schools can cost more per pupil than regular schools.[18] An Iowa study found that investing in education alternatives yielded long-term savings to the state in welfare, unemployment, and incarceration expenses;[9] however, since the number and percentage of at-risk students are predicted to rise with increases in poverty, non-English speaking immigrants, and minority populations, a systems focus could be more cost-effective than one that targets individuals. Recent policy changes in how Title I and special education funds can be spent reflect a shift from an individual to a schoolwide focus.[19]

A focus on problem students may threaten system equity by segregating poor, disabled, and minority students in alternative programs.

Who is being sent to alternative schools? Preliminary studies in two states caution not to let alternative schools become "dumping grounds" for undesirable or unwanted students.[20,21] Minority and special education students are more likely to be suspended and expelled,[20,22] so they may be disproportionately shunted to alternative schools as well.[23]

The new IDEA amendments require states to monitor both the percentages of minority students placed in special education programs[24] and the rates at which special education students are suspended and expelled.[25] Although the law allows schools to place exceptional students in alternative settings under certain conditions, it requires them to follow procedural safeguards,[26] to allow the student to participate in the general curriculum, to continue the provision of special education services and modifications to meet goals set forth in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and to include services to address the problem behavior.[27] Alternative programs that lack high standards, clear entrance and exit criteria, and the right to due process risk charges of discrimination, inequity, and civil rights violations.

Preliminary studies in two states caution not to let alternative schools become "dumping grounds" for undesirabale or unwanted students.

A Question of Purpose: To Educate, Discipline, or Heal?

The purpose of most early alternative schools was educational, offering students an option for learning, while the purpose of many new alternative settings is correctional—either disciplinary or therapeutic. Based on 30 years of research, Raywid has identified the characteristics of these three general school types, defined by purpose.[4,6,28]

Type I schools offer full-time, multiyear, education options for students of all kinds, including those needing more individualization, those seeking an innovative or challenging curriculum, or dropouts wishing to earn their diplomas. A full instructional program offers students the credits needed for graduation. Students choose to attend. Other characteristics include divergence from standard school organization and practices (deregulation, flexibility, autonomy, and teacher and student empowerment); an especially caring, professional staff; small size and small classes; and a personalized, whole-student approach that builds a sense of affiliation and features individual instruction, self-paced work, and career counseling.[4,6,7,8,9,10,29,30] Models range from schools-within-schools to magnet schools, charter schools, schools without walls, experiential schools, career-focused and job-based schools, dropout-recovery programs, after-hours schools, and schools in atypical settings like shopping malls and museums.[6,10,28,29,31,32]

Discipline is the distinguishing characteristic of **Type II** programs, which aim to segregate, contain, and reform disruptive students. Students typically do not choose to attend, but are sent to the school for specified time periods or until behavior requirements are met. Since placement is short-term, the curriculum is limited to a few basic, required courses or is entirely supplied by the "home school" as a list of assignments. Familiar models in-

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clude last-chance schools and in-school suspension.[6,8,28]

Type III programs provide short-term but therapeutic settings for students with social and emotional problems that create academic and behavioral barriers to learning. Although Type III programs target specific populations—offering counseling, access to social services, and academic remediation—students can choose not to participate.[6,8,28]

Some experts see distinctions between types beginning to blur. For example, Type I and Type II schools increasingly offer counseling, a Type III characteristic.[6,33]

However, the purpose of a state's alternative schools, as defined by its laws and policies, remains critical to program implementation, evaluation, effectiveness, and even equity.[6,33] The language in laws and policies related to purpose may create the following dilemmas for schools that must implement the legislation.

Mixed signals about purpose may confuse implementation efforts.

Does legislation seek to improve education results for students whose needs are not met in regular programs, or to separate disruptive students from mainstream classrooms? Schools must understand what they're supposed to accomplish before they can plan how to go about it. Both Raywid and Duke warn that organizational and implementation strategies differ widely according to what purpose one hopes to achieve.[8,34] Table 1 presents such implementation issues in relation to school type or purpose (see p. 4).

Mixed signals about purpose may thwart evaluation and accountability efforts.

Does the alternative program do what it's intended to do? Schools must understand the intent or purpose of legislation in order to measure results and progress toward goals.[8] If policy makers want to serve students whose needs are not met in traditional settings, then schools will report data such as grade point averages, attendance, and graduation rates. If policy makers hope to improve school discipline, then schools will track disciplinary referrals, suspensions, and expulsions.

Although alternative schools show general positive effects on student outcomes, a meta-analysis of alternative education programs found the largest effects in schools designed to serve the needs of specific populations.[35]

Schools must understand what they're supposed to accomplish before they can plan how to go about it.

As the director of an alternative school in Rhode Island explains, "If an alternative school is set up to help teen parents get their GED and learn job skills, it isn't likely to work miracles for teens with criminal histories and drug addiction" (p. 42).[36]

Some state laws mix purposes or do not address purpose at all, simply allowing districts to create alternative schools for students who are suspended, expelled, or at risk of dropping out.[26] Such lack of direction, while maximizing local control, may result in uneven implementation across districts, may undermine system equity and quality, and could make evaluation, oversight, and regulation difficult.[20,21,22]

A punitive purpose may cause schools to adopt ineffective models for improving learning or behavior.

What types of alternative schools are most effective? Research shows that true education alternatives, not punishment, work best to improve both student behavior and achievement.[3,6,7,8,9,28,37] Even though their purpose is educational rather than disciplinary, Type I schools have proved to be successful for at-risk students, including those with behavioral problems.[4,8,11,30,34,37,38] Their individualized approach helps students succeed academically; their small size and family atmosphere keep students connected and in school; and their voluntary enrollment policies boost student motivation and goal setting. Most of the research showing positive effects for alternative schools applies to Type I schools.[4,6,8,9,37]

So far, research shows that disciplinary programs and practices reap no positive long-term gains and may even increase negative outcomes.[8,34,37,39,40] Florida's statewide analysis of in-school suspension showed the practice brought no improvement in student behavior.[8,9] Oklahoma studied data on the state's alternative students—credits earned, classes failed, grade point averages, absences, standardized test scores, and disciplinary referrals—and found that "students in alternative education programs improved substantially, while students in disciplinary programs [in-school suspension] declined" (p. 1).[37]

Type III schools may tempo-

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Table 1

Implementation Issues by School Type

	Type I	Type II	Type III
Purpose	**Educational (fix the educational environment)**	**Disciplinary (fix the child)**	**Therapeutic (fix the child)**
Organization, administration, and governance	Small student body (< 250) 25:1 student-teacher ratio Deregulation, flexibility Autonomous Teacher/student empowerment Shared decision making Part-time administrator or teacher-director for small school	Small classes for close supervision Separation from host school optional (may be one room in host school) Traditional governance; top-down control	Very small classes for personal attention (4-5, limit of 10-12) Flexibility to meet individual needs Separation from host school optional (may be one room in host school) Collaboration with service providers
Climate	Challenging, caring, nurturing, supportive Collaboration Student-centered Personal relationships, bonding to faculty and students Focus on whole child High expectations for student achievement, behavior Student behavior guided by norms	Controlling Highly structured, regulated Student compliance Student behavior controlled by rules Focus on behavior Punitive	Caring, nurturing, supportive Student behavior mediated by counseling Student-centered, service oriented Personal relationships, bonding important Focus on attitude and behavior
Facilities	Separate facility Alternate time in existing facility (evenings, weekends) Alternative, nontraditional locations (e.g., shopping malls, store fronts, museums)	Separate wing or room in host school Alternate time in existing facility (evenings, weekends)	Room in host school Alternate time in existing facility (evenings, weekends)
Transportation	Need depends on model (e.g., nothing extra needed for school within school) Regular bus schedule may be provided to separate facility or after-hours program May be required by IEP for special education students	Need depends on model (e.g., nothing extra needed for ISS, room in host school) Transportation requirements may be waived in legislation May be required by IEP for special education students Parental responsibility	Need depends on model (e.g., nothing extra needed for room in host school) May be required by IEP for special education students
Staffing	Teacher chooses, not assigned Hiring, seniority waivers may be needed May be contracted on part-time or as-needed basis to meet graduation, IEP requirements Teacher assumes multiple roles (teacher, mentor, counselor) Repertoire of teaching skills, strategies Caring, humane Accountable for student success Collegiality, teamwork Professional community	Teacher choice optional Hiring, seniority practices may be waived Repertoire of teaching skills, strategies to teach multiage, multilevel students	Teacher chooses, not assigned Hiring, seniority waivers required Good relationship, affective skills needed Caring, humane
Curriculum and instruction	Full instructional program Integrated curriculum, interdisciplinary projects Individualized (for learning styles, needs, current achievement levels) Clear program goals Experiential, hands-on learning Vocational, career, community service components Challenging, engaging, relevant Structured for early, frequent success Continuous progress model Student responsibility for learning Multidisciplinary: academic, behavioral, social contexts	Academics not the focus Provides only basics, no electives Skill and drill Lessons may be provided by home school Behavior modification Remediation	Academics not the focus Provides basics Remediation and rehabilitation Lessons may be provided by home school Modified curriculum to meet individual needs Individual approach Counseling

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Table 1 (continued)

	Type I	Type II	Type III
Entrance, exit criteria	Students attend by choice Long-term; students may graduate from program	Student assigned or given limited choice (e.g., alternative school or jail) Short-term (one day, rest of semester, rest of year); student returns to host school when time/behavior requirements met By contract with parent, child Transition services critical Collaboration with home school, support system for returning students important	Students referred to program, targeted students attend by choice Short-term (determined by student need, program goals) Transition services critical Collaboration with home school, support system for returning students important
Graduation credits	Full curriculum; meets state graduation requirements Waivers may be needed for innovative approaches (e.g., graduation expectations in lieu of Carnegie units)	Graduation through host school Waivers may be needed due to limited curriculum (e.g., graduation expectations in lieu of specific courses and Carnegie units) Alternatives to diploma (e.g., GED)	Graduation through host school Waivers may be needed to meet individual needs (e.g., graduation expectations in lieu of Carnegie units)
Special education	Services must be provided according to IEP Inclusion facilitated by flexible curriculum, individualized instruction	Services must be provided according to IEP Assignment to setting may be contested or prohibited if behavior caused by disability Screening for special education may be indicated	Services must be provided according to IEP Inclusion facilitated by individualized instruction, curriculum Screening for special education may be indicated
Finance, costs	Per-pupil allotments may suffice (especially if lower administrative, facilities costs and normal pupil-teacher ratio) May qualify for magnet or charter school funds or delinquency/dropout prevention funds Extra appropriations from legislature, state, local district Foundation, business support	May be higher due to low pupil-teacher ratio Extra appropriations from legislature, state, local district Support from law enforcement agencies	May be higher due to low pupil-teacher ratio Extra appropriations from legislature, state, local district Support from social service agencies Foundation, agency support for targeted student groups (e.g., dropout prevention)
Program evaluation, effectiveness	Monitor state outcome/performance indicators Type I schools associated with positive results (increased course credits, GPA, achievement test scores, attendance, graduation rates; decreased behavior referrals)	Monitor state outcome/performance indicators Type II schools associated with negative results (decreased math, reading achievement; increased absence, discipline referrals; no correlation to reduction in suspension, expulsion, dropout rates)	Monitor state outcome/performance indicators Type III schools associated with mixed results, positive results fade with return to home school (results may improve with better transition services, more follow-up care)

rarely improve student behavior and achievement, but results tend to fade when students return to home schools.[6,28] Providing follow-up and transition services to students reentering home schools may enhance long-term outcomes.[41]

A punitive purpose may jeopardize system equity and excellence.

How do the students and standards of alternative schools compare to other schools in the system? Gregory warns that a punitive purpose may put educators in the awkward—if not unconscionable—position of creating schools undesirable enough to deter bad behavior.[33]

> Wehlage has frequently heard that "special programs for the marginal student should not be 'too good' because these students might get the wrong message . . . they must pay for their mistakes and poor attitude toward school" (p. 21).[42]

A study of one state's alternative schools found a similar attitude applied to staffing. Many of its districts' alternative programs lacked appropriately certified teachers, and some districts "sentenced" teachers to alternative placements. One superintendent was reported to say, "I'm not going to waste my certified teachers on those kids" (p. 3).[20]

Punitive attitudes carry the risk of creating a two-tiered system of education: good schools and good teachers for good kids, and bad schools and bad teachers for bad kids. Not only does this attitude violate constitutional guarantees of equal protection, it doesn't work. Time and again, experience shows that excellence inspires excellence, as demonstrated by Spanish Harlem's Central Park East Secondary School in New York City,[4] while rejection and punishment further estrange and alienate at-risk students—from both school and society.[43]

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A Question of Results: What Works?

Research on secondary schools has identified three dimensions of school climate that contribute to disciplined learning environments: "strong emphasis on the academic mission of the school; firm, fair, and consistently enforced discipline standards; and an ethic of caring that guides staff-student relationships" (p. 12).[40] These transcend differences in student populations to produce desired academic and behavioral outcomes.

More particularly, Wehlage and Raywid have identified three interrelated factors that distinguish successful alternative schools: (1) a sense of community, (2) engaging instruction, and (3) the organizational structure to support them.[9]

Key criteria for building a **sense of community** are choice[8,20] and smallness.[9,26] Choice (or voluntary participation) by both students and teachers promotes affiliation, bonding, and membership.[8,9] Robert Barr, coauthor of *Hope at Last for At-Risk Youth*, says that attendance by choice has "almost magic" results.[44] Small size helps schools become caring communities by allowing teachers and students to get to know each other. The resulting community, like a family, supports the whole child, doing whatever must be done to ensure academic, social, and emotional growth.[9,43]

Engaging instruction is student-centered, interesting, and challenging. It is experiential, noncompetitive, relevant, and individualized, promoting mastery learning, continuous progress, creativity, and success.[5,43] Engaging instruction requires teachers with the depth and breadth of skill and knowledge to meet individual learning needs across multigrade levels—and the passion to do it.

The **organizational structure** that supports alternative learning communities involves students, educators, and parents working together to make decisions about living and learning at school. It is supported by collaboration across groups, collegiality among staff, a social order based on norms rather than rules, and the flexibility and autonomy to respond to changing and diverse needs.

Is it working for us?

To determine if alternative school legislation is working or not working in particular schools and states, policy makers must first determine the law's purpose or goal, then look at results—as reflected by specific school data. The following questions, with suggestions for data collection, can help clarify if legislation is accomplishing intended goals, or is causing unintended consequences that could threaten system excellence and equity.

Engaging instruction is student-centered, interesting, and challenging.

What are the state's alternative schools supposed to do?

- **Improve learning outcomes?** Collect data for several consecutive school years to look for improvements in grade point averages (GPAs), attendance, and graduation rates and for decreases in failure and dropout rates, compared to outcomes before the legislation was implemented.
- **Improve behavior?** Collect data for several consecutive school years to look for lower rates of suspensions, expulsions, and placements in alternative disciplinary environments (in-school suspension, disciplinary alternative school), compared to rates before the legislation was implemented.

Who is intended to benefit from legislation?

- **Students placed in alternative environments?** Track the above learning and/or behavior data over time (until graduation) for students in alternative programs to look for improvement.
- **All students remaining in regular education environments?** Track the above learning and/or behavior data over time (until graduation) for host schools that feed disruptive students into alternative programs to look for improvement.

Do the state's alternative schools discriminate?

- **Against special education students?** Determine the percentage of alternative school students in special education. Compare this percentage to the percentage of special education students in the student bodies of schools that feed into the alternative school.
- **Against minority students?** Determine the percentage of alternative school students from minority populations. Compare this percentage to the percentage of minority students in the student bodies of

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schools that feed into the alternative school.

Do the state's alternative schools maintain state standards for public schools?

- **Do teachers have appropriate credentials and skills?** Determine if teachers are certified in their subject areas and if they have demonstrated the skills to work with alternative school populations.
- **Are curricula, materials, and facilities comparable?** Make sure that alternative schools are subject to the same accreditation standards applied to other public schools.
- **Are the state's alternative schools cost-effective?** If the data show no improvement in learning and/or behavior for either alternative or feeder school students, then the program should be terminated. If the data show improvement, then cost-effectiveness can be determined by comparing alternative school costs to costs the state would accrue without the alternative program: e.g., the cost of public assistance or incarceration for dropouts, compared to contributions to public coffers for employed graduates.

Summary

Local efforts to design and implement a system of alternative education must be guided by the parameters of each state's law or policy. However, the considerable body of research on alternative schools can help local school policy makers improve the chances that their schools, and their students, will succeed.

A systems focus and educational purpose offer our best hope for reaching education goals for all children, regardless of race, ability, or socioeconomic status. As Aleem and Moles remind us, "Schools may do more to reduce student violence by creating nurturing environments than by placing primary emphasis on trying to control student behavior" (p. 50).[40] In contrast, deficit models that attempt to "fix the child," scare tactics, authoritarian approaches, and punishment do not produce the outcomes policy makers, educators, and the public seek.[41] Only time, and a hard look at practices and results, can answer the big questions about the new breed of alternative schools:

> In embracing the concept of alternative schools for "problem" students, are we retreating from the promise of equal educational opportunity for all? In isolating "problem" students, rather than finding ways to improve the culture and climate of our regular schools, are we giving up too easily? (p. 2)[20]

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